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Matter of Fact . . . . . By Joseph Alsop

The 'Gap'

AT THE Pentagon, they shudder when they speak of the "gap," which means the years 1960, 1961, 1962 and 1963. They shudder because in these years, the American government will flaccidly permit the Kremlin to gain an almost unchallengeable superiority in the nuclear striking power that was once our specialty. The persnickety facts that prove this terrible charge are as follows.

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First, and most horrifying, there is the guided missile picture. The Soviets have already completed above 1000 tests of ballistic missiles with ranges from 500 to 1400 miles —the ranges needed to neutralize or destroy our overseas bases. They have also tested several intercontinental ballistic missiles, whereas we have yet to test our first fully assembled Atlas.

Even post-Sputnik, moreover, our missile programs are pitiable. For the years of the gap, they will provide a couple of hundred of intermediate range missiles of doubtful value for emplacement in Europe. They will give us, in this country, forty of the sub-sonic Snark missile. And they will give us, again in this country, four wings of the Titan missile and nine wings of the Atlas missile.

Atlas and Titan, being true ICBMs, are the missiles that matter. On present projections, we shall have thirty Atlas and Titan missiles operational in 1960; seventy in 1961; and 130 in 1962. There the story will end, except that a few of the Navy's submarine-born Polaris missiles may be operational by 1962; and at sometime, quite probably long after 1963, we shall begin to get the solid-fueled Minuteman missile.

Against this American missile striking power, the Soviets should have between 1000 and 2000 of their medium range missiles to neutralize our overseas bases in the "gap" years. They should further produce their first 100 intercontinental missiles by 1959, and they should place, against our thirty, by the end of 1960; 1000 ICBMs in place, against our seventy, by the end of 1961; 1500 ICBMs in place, against our 130, by the end of 1962; and 2000 ICBMs against our 130 plus a few Polaris, by the end of 1963.

Second, there is the bomber picture, which is apparently thought to compensate for the sheer horror of the guided missile picture. The United States will complete its B-52 program for the Strategic Air Command in the year 1960. SAC will then have about 500 of these long-range bombers in units, plus some spares. SAC will also have about 1400 medium-range B-47s, and will be starting the first of its seventy planned B-58s, which are supersonic but still medium range. Jet tankers to give full striking power to the B-52s and B-58s will be available; but no jet tankers are to be provided for the B-47s.

With the existing unsatisfactory KC-97 tankers, the B-47s are heavily dependent on the overseas bases which are now being neutralized. B-47 striking power must therefore be depreciated by at least 60 per cent. Thus SAC's realistic striking power in 1961, 1962 and 1963 will be equivalent to 500 B-52s, seventy B-58s and about 500 B-47s.

There is much controversy about the years 1960 through 1963. The Administration has of course chosen the most optimistic estimates, which are almost surely wrong on past experience. But it is admitted that Soviet production of their Bison long-range bomber, comparable to our B-52, reached and long maintained the very high rate of 12 a month. It is further admitted that Bison output, although sharply cut back, is still going on at the rate of about four per month.

Thus it seems reasonable to give the Soviet SAC a basic striking power in the period of the "gap" amounting to 250 Bisons, plus 100 Bears (their very big, very long-range turbo-prop bomber, plus 1000 Badgers (their equivalent of our B-47). Even if this is all, the American margin of bomber striking power will not be enormous. But six months ago, it became known that the Soviets bomber, which should have the speed of our B-58 with full intercontinental range as well.

Judging by their past behavior, the Soviets should have this bomber in production by 1959, and entering combat units by 1960. And with this bomber added to the Soviet SAC, the Soviets may at least attain parity in manned-bomber striking power, in 1961 or 1962.

Third, the air defense picture further darkens the bomber picture. The Air Defense Command of the United States is presently equipped with a job lot of F-89s, F-94s, F-100s, and F-102s — about 1900 planes in all. The worst of the job lot will be replaced in the years of the "gap" with the excellent F-106, but the F-106 contract has lately been cut back, so we shall still have a job lot. In addition, our radar warning system will be greatly improved. The Sage system of combat control will also become operational. We shall further have a rather spotty point defense system based on the Army's Nike missiles. And just at the very end of the "gap," some of the Air Force's Bomarc missiles may come in.

In contrast NATO estimates give the Soviets today an air defense command comprising 10,000 planes, also a job lot but the same sort of job lot we have. Replacement of obsolete Soviet aircraft with their superior Flashlight fighter is proceeding rapidly. Their air warning system has better radars than ours now, and is much denser than ours. And they have now completed a remarkably strong missile-based point defense system of the Soviet Union, and are emplacing anti-aircraft missiles in the satellites.

If we are honest about it, then, the Soviet air defense system is at least twice and perhaps three or four times as strong as ours. That logically cancels out any bomber superiority we may retain— —assuming we retain any by the end of the "gap." As the Soviets will then have a projected superiority in missile striking power of somewhere between 5 and 10-to-1, no wonder they shudder at the